

ii. The Qur'ān has Variant Readings

It is alleged that the Qur'ān has variant readings. Typically a verse may have more than one variation. These variations are not merely in pronunciation, they exist, for example, in addition or deletions of words, in the singular and plural form of words, in declensions and in verb structures.⁸ It is generally believed that these variations have been divinely revealed. The first person to record these readings in the form of a book was Abū 'Ubayd Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 224 AH). He recorded twenty five readings; Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH) recorded over twenty readings, while it was Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (d. 324 AH) who selected the seven famous ones.⁹ These seven readings became famous through their readers. They are:

Place	Reader
1. Madīnah	Nāfi' (d. 169 AH)
2. Makkah	Ibn Kathīr (d. 120 AH)
3. Damascus	Ibn 'Āmir (d. 118 AH)
4. Baṣrah	Abū 'Amr (d. 154 AH)
5. Kūfah	'Āṣim (d. 127 AH)
6. Kūfah	Ḥamzah (d. 156 AH)
7. Kūfah	Kisā'ī (189 AH)

These readings cannot be accepted in any manner as having the same status as the Qur'ān because of the following reasons.

(i) There exists a consensus of opinion among the scholars of our *ummah* on the fact that the Qur'ān is *mutawātir* (ie such a large number of people have transmitted the Qur'ān that the existence of any error in the transmitted text is impossible).

Now, if the chains of narrators of each of these variant readings are examined, none of them can be claimed as *mutawātir*. They may be *mutawātir* from their famous originators but they are certainly not *mutawātir* all the way

8 For a compendium of such examples, see: Muḥammad Fahad Khārūf, *Al-Muyassar fī al-qirā'āt al-arba' 'asharah*, 4th ed., Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2006.

9 For further details, see: Abū al-Khayr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Jazarī, *Al-Nashr fī al-qirā'āt al-'ashr*, vol. 1 (Egypt: Maktabah al-tujjāriyyah, n.d.), 33–35.

from these originators up to the Prophet (sws). At best, they can be classified as *aḥād* (isolate reports). Thus al-Zarkashī writes:

القراءات السبع متواترة عند الجمهور وقيل مشهورة ... والتحقيق أنها متواترة عن الأئمة السبعة أمّا تواترها عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم ففيه نظر فإنّ إسناده الأئمة السبعة بهذه القراءات موجود في كتب القراءات وهي نقل الواحد عن الواحد لم تكمل شروط التواتر في استواء الطرفين والواسطة: وهذا شيء موجود في كتبهم.

The opinion of the majority is that these seven readings are *mutawātir*. However, one opinion is that they are *mashhūr*¹⁰ The truth in this regard is that they are *mutawātir* from these seven [*qurra'*]. As far as their *tawātur* from the Prophet (sws) is concerned, this is debatable. For the chains of narrators of these seven are found in the books of *qirā'āt*. These chains are transmission from a single person to another and do not fulfil the condition of *tawātur* neither from the first narrator to the last nor in between.¹¹

(ii) Not only are these readings isolate reports (*aḥād*), but also many of the narrators of these readings are not regarded as trustworthy by the scholars of *'ilm al-rijāl* as far as accepting *Aḥādīth* from them is concerned. As an example, this is what is written about Ḥafṣ ibn Sulaymān, perhaps the most famous and most widely acclaimed of all the disciples of the major *qurra'*:

In the opinion of 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Ḥātim, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Yūsuf ibn Khirash and Imām Muslim he is *matrūk al-ḥadīth* (abandoned in Ḥadīth). Al-Bukhārī comments on him as *tarakūhu*. 'Alī ibn al-Madīnī and Abū Zur'ah regard him to be *da'īf al-ḥadīth* (weak in Ḥadīth). In the opinion of Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn as quoted by Abū Qudāmah Sarakhsī and 'Uthmān ibn Sa'īd al-Dārimī he is *laysa bi thiqaḥ* (not reliable). Al-Nasā'ī also regards him to be *laysa bi thiqaḥ*. Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad al-Baghdādī says that the *Aḥādīth* narrated by him are not worth writing as primary evidence and all of them mention

¹⁰ ie. widely attested.

¹¹ Abū 'Abdullāh Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Bahādur ibn 'Abdullāh al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1980), 319.

unfamiliar things in religion. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Yūsuf ibn Khirāsh says that he is a great liar and forges *Āḥadīth*. Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘īn also regards him to be a great liar.¹²

It seems quite strange that a person so widely regarded as unreliable (even called a liar) in accepting Ḥadīth from be regarded as a very dependable person as far the Qur’ān is concerned.

(iii) The only complete reading of the Qur’ān which is in vogue from the time of the Prophet (sws) is the *al-qirā’at al-‘āmmah* (the universal reading) – the very reading read out to the Prophet (sws) once the revelation of the Qur’ān had been completed. It was this very reading which existed among the companions of the Prophet (sws). Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Sulamī (d. 105 AH)¹³ narrates:

قال أبو عبد الرحمن السلمي: كانت قراءة أبي بكر وعمر وعثمان وزيد بن ثابت والمهاجرين والأنصار واحدة كانوا يقرءون القراءة العامة وهي القراءة التي قرأها رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم على جبريل مرتين في العام الذي قبض فيه وكان زيد بن ثابت شهد العرضة الأخيرة وكان يقرئ الناس بها حتى مات.

The reading of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and Zayd ibn Thābit and that of all the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār was one. They would read the Qur’ān according to the *al-qirā’at al-‘āmmah*. This is the same reading which was read out to the Prophet (sws) in the year of his death by Gabriel. Zayd ibn Thābit was also present in this reading [called] the *al-‘ardah al-akhīrah*¹⁴ and it was this very reading that he taught the Qur’ān to people till his death.¹⁵

As far as certain countries are concerned where the Qur’ān is practically read

12 See: Abū al-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf ibn al-Zakī al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl fī asmā’ al-rijāl*, 2nd ed., vol. 7 (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-risālah, 1413 AH), 13–15.

13 See: Al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-kamāl*, vol. 14, 410.

14 ie. the final recital.

15 Al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān*, vol. 1, 237.

on a different reading,¹⁶ these readings are bound to have been enforced in them in a certain period of time much later after the departure of the Prophet (sws). Thus, for example, it is historically known that the reading of Nāfi' was officially promulgated in the third century *hijrah* in North Africa after the rise of the Malikite *fiqh* in this area.¹⁷

It is clear from this analysis that these extant readings which are found in books of *tafsīr* and read and taught in religious schools can in no way be accepted. Whether they originated from insistence by some to cling to the first recital of the Qur'ān, or were mere explanations of the actual verses written down by the companions in their own codices or were concocted to disparage the Qur'ān is a mystery which perhaps may never be solved. However, this much is certain that they cannot be regarded as the Qur'ān in any way.

iii. The Qur'ān was revealed on Seven *Ahruf*

There are certain narratives which say that the Qur'ān was revealed on seven *ahruf*. A typical narrative reads:

حدثني يحيى عن مالك عن ابن شهاب عن عروة بن الزبير عن عبد الرحمن بن عبد القاري أنه قال سمعت عمر بن الخطاب يقول سمعت هشام بن حكيم بن حزام يقرأ سورة الفرقان على غير ما أقرؤها وكان رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أقرأنيها فكدت أن أعجل عليه ثم أمهلته حتى انصرف ثم لببته بردائه فجئت به رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فقلت يا رسول الله إني سمعت هذا يقرأ سورة الفرقان على غير ما أقرأتنيها فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أرسله ثم قال اقرأ يا هشام فقرأ القراءة التي سمعته يقرأ فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم هكذا أنزلت ثم قال لي اقرأ فقرأتها فقال هكذا أنزلت إن هذا القرآن أنزل على سبعة أحرف فاقرءوا ما تيسر منه

¹⁶ Thus for example, the Qur'ān is read on the reading of Qālūn (d. 220 AH), a student of Nāfi' (d. 169 AH), in Tunisia and on the reading of Warsh (d. 197 AH), another student of Nāfi', in Morocco. Similarly, the Qur'ān is read on the reading of Dūrī (d. 246 AH), a student of Abū 'Amr (d. 154 AH), in parts of Sudan and Yemen.

¹⁷ For details see: Hind Shalbī, *Al-Qirā'āt bi Afriqiyyah*, 1st ed. (Tunisia: Al-Dār al-'arabiyyah li al-kitāb, 1983), 223–235.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd al-Qārī narrated: “‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said before me: ‘I heard Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām reading Sūrah Furqān in a different way from the one I used to read it, and the Prophet (sws) himself had read out this *sūrah* to me. Consequently, as soon as I heard him, I wanted to get hold of him. However, I gave him respite until he had finished the prayer. Then I got hold of his cloak and dragged him to the Prophet (sws). I said to him: “I have heard this person [Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām] reading Sūrah Furqān in a different way from the one you had read it out to me.” The Prophet (sws) said: “Leave him alone [O ‘Umar].” Then he said to Hishām: “Read [it].” [‘Umar said:] “He read it out in the same way as he had done before me.” [At this,] the Prophet (sws) said: “It was revealed thus.” Then the Prophet (sws) asked me to read it out. So I read it out. [At this], he said: “It was revealed thus; this Qur’ān has been revealed on *Seven Aḥruf*. You can read it in any of them you find easy from among them.” ’ ’¹⁸

While critically analyzing this narrative, Ghāmidī writes:¹⁹

If the following points about this narrative are kept in contemplation, it becomes evident that it is an absolutely meaningless narrative which should not be considered of any worth in this regard:

Firstly, even though this narrative has been recorded in the basic books of Ḥadīth literature, no one in history has ever been able to offer a convincing explanation of it rendering it totally ambiguous. Al-Suyūṭī²⁰ has recorded about forty interpretations of this narrative, and then while acknowledging the weakness of each of these has confessed that this narrative should be regarded among the *mutashābihāt*, whose meaning is only known to God:

¹⁸ Mālik ibn Anas, *Al-Mu’attā*, vol. 1 (Egypt: Dār iḥyā’ al-turāth al-‘arabī, n.d.), 201, (no. 473).

¹⁹ Ghāmidī, *Mīzān*, 30–31.

²⁰ Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kamāl al-Dīn Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad ibn Sābiq al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Baydār: Manshūrāt al-raḍī, 1343 AH), 165–172.

وأرجحها عندي قول من قال: إن هذا من المتشابه الذي لا يدري تأويله

And to me the best opinion in this regard is that of the people who say that this Ḥadīth is from among matters of *mutashābihāt*, the meaning of which cannot be understood.²¹

Secondly, the only plausible interpretation of the word *ahruf* is that it connotes pronunciation²² of words the Arabs were used to. However, in this case, the text of the Ḥadīth itself negates this meaning. It is known that both ‘Umar (rta) and Hishām (rta) belonged to the same tribe: the Quraysh. Obviously, people of the same tribe could not have had different pronunciations.

Thirdly, even if it is accepted that this difference was of pronunciation between various tribes and as a result they were allowed to read it variously, the verb *unzila* (was revealed) is very inappropriate. The Qur’ān has specified that it was revealed in the language of the Prophet’s tribe: the Quraysh (See for example: 19:97, 44:58). After this, it can be accepted that the various tribes were allowed to read it according to their own accents, but how can this be accepted that the Almighty Himself revealed the various dialects and pronunciations.

Fourthly, it is known that Hishām had accepted Islam on the day Makkah was conquered. If this Ḥadīth is accepted, it would mean that even after the conquest of Makkah senior Companions and even a close associate like ‘Umar (rta) was unaware of the fact that the Prophet (sws) secretly taught the Qur’ān in some other form and reading from the one openly heard from the Prophet (sws) and preserved in writing and in memory. Every person can realize how grave this claim is and how far reaching are its effects.

²¹ Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kamāl al-Dīn Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad ibn Sābiq al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tanwīr al-ḥawālīk*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-jīl, 1993), 199.

²² The actual words are: *luḡhāt* and *lahjāt*. There is a difference between the two. In the former the pronunciation of the word changes because of a variation in *ḥarakāt* (eg. نُجَل and جَل), while in the latter the pronunciation of a word changes because of a variation in accent. (*Translator’s Note*)

Source

Shehzad Saleem, *Common Misconceptions about Islam* (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2009), 5–13.

In addition, in terms of their scale of transmission, readings of the Qur'an were not always accepted as canonical or authentic because they had met the technical requirements of legal theorists for massive transmission (*tawātur*) but simply because they had some *isnād* support and had become widely accepted.⁵⁵

55. See Intisar Rabb, "Non-Canonical Readings of the Qur'an: Recognition and Authenticity (the Ḥimṣī Reading)," *Journal of Quranic Studies* 8.4 (2006): 105ff.; Aḥmad 'Alī al-Imām, *Variant Readings of the Qur'an* (Herndon, Va.: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1998), 121. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī attributes a similar opinion to Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665/1267) and al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122): Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 9: 39. This was pointed out by the later Muslim analyst al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), who stated that the claim of Sunni legal theorists that the Qur'an is entirely *mutawātir* in all its verses across the seven canonical readings is a claim devoid of "even a hint of knowledge, for indeed each one of these readings has been transmitted via *āḥād* means, as anyone who is familiar with the *isnāds* of those [seven] readers for their transmissions [of the Qur'an] knows": Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Shawkānī, *Irshād al-fuḥūl ilā taḥqīq 'ilm al-uṣūl*, ed. Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Badrī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1412/1992), 62–63.

Source

Jonathan Brown, 'Did the Prophet Say It or Not?: Literal, Historical and Effective Truth in the Sunni Ḥadīth Tradition', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 2 (2009): 271.

(I) Variant Readings

The answer to the first question is that the Qur'ān is only what is recorded in the *muṣḥaf*, and which, except for some areas of North Africa, is recited by a vast majority of the Muslim *ummah*. None else except the reading on which this Qur'ān is recited is the Qur'ān or can be presented in the capacity and status of the Qur'ān. Thus we think that this question does not even arise.

In the following paragraphs, we shall present the details of this view.

The Qur'ān says:

سَنُقْرُكَ فَلَا تَنْسَى إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ الْجَهْرَ وَمَا يَخْفَى (٧-٦:٨٧)

Soon We shall recite [all of] it to you [O Prophet!]; then you will not forget except what Allah pleases. He indeed knows what is apparent before [you] at this time, and that also which is concealed [from you]. (87:6-7)

لَا تُحْرِكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ وَقُرْآنَهُ فَإِذَا قَرَأْنَاهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ (١٩-١٦:٧٥)

[To acquire] this [Qur'ān] swiftly [O Prophet!] do not move your tongue hastily over it. Indeed, upon Us is its collection and recital. So when We have recited it, follow this recital [of Ours]. Then upon Us is to explain it [wherever need be]. (75:16-19)

The scheme of God regarding the revelation and collection of the Qur'ān mentioned in these verses can be stated as follows:

Firstly, the Prophet (sws) has been told that the way the Qur'ān is being revealed piecemeal to him keeping in view the circumstances is the correct way of revelation; however, he should not worry about its protection and collection and arrangement. A new recital would ensue after this chronological one. At that time, if the Almighty intends to revoke something on the basis of His wisdom, He will do so and then have the Prophet (sws) read it in a manner that

he will not forget any part of it and the Qur'ān will be consigned to him in its very final form which will remain protected.

Secondly, this second recital would take place once the Qur'ān has been arranged in the form of a book, and simultaneously he would be bound to follow this recital in future. He would then not be allowed to read the Qur'ān according to its previous recital.

Thirdly, it was told that if any directive needed further explanation, it would be done so at this second recital, and in this manner this book would stand completed in every way after collection and arrangement and explanation by the Almighty Himself.

It is this second and final recital of the Qur'ān which is also termed as *al-‘arḍah al-akhīrah* (the final presentation). It is evident from various narratives that each year Gabriel would read out the Qur'ān revealed in that year to the Prophet (sws) during the month of Ramaḍān. In the last year, in the *al-‘arḍah al-akhīrah*, he read out the Qur'ān to him twice.

Abū Hurayrah (rta) narrates:

كان يعرض على النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم القرآن كل عام مرة فعرض عليه مرتين في العام الذي قبض فيه

Each year the Qur'ān would be read out to the Prophet Muḥammad (sws) once; however, the year he died, it was read out to him twice.²⁶

The Prophet (sws) used to read the Qur'ān on this recital till he died. After him, the rightly guided caliphs, and all the Companions (rta) from among the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār would read the Qur'ān on this recital. There was no difference in this regard between them. Later, it was this recital which was called the *al-qirā'at al-‘āmmah*. Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 73 AH) reports:

²⁶ Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 2nd ed. (Riyāḍ: Dār al-salām, 1999), 896, (no. 4998).

كانت قراءة أبي بكر وعمر وعثمان وزيد بن ثابت والمهاجرين والأنصار واحدة كانوا يقرءون القراءة العامة وهي القراءة التي قرأها رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم على جبريل مرتين في العام الذي قبض فيه وكان زيد بن ثابت شهد العرضة الأخيرة وكان يقرئ الناس بها حتى مات.

The reading of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and Zayd ibn Thābit and that of all the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār was one. They would read the Qur’ān according to the *al-qirā’āt al-‘āmmah*. This is the same reading which was read out to the Prophet (sws) in the year of his death by Gabriel. Zayd ibn Thābit²⁷ was also present in this reading [called] the *al-‘ardah al-akhīrah* and it was this very reading that he taught the Qur’ān to people till his death.²⁸

Consequently, it is only this recital which possesses oral *tawātur* from the time of the Companions (rta) to date. Our scholars generally call it the *qirā’at* of Ḥafṣ (d. 180 AH) whereas it is actually *al-qirā’āt al-‘āmmah* and classical scholars, as pointed out above, actually introduce it by this name. Ibn Sīrīn narrates:

القراءة التي عرضت على النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم في العام الذي قبض فيه هي القراءة التي يقرؤها الناس اليوم.

The reading on which the Qur’ān was read out to the Prophet (sws) in the year of his death is the same according to which people are reading the Qur’ān today.²⁹

²⁷ Besides him, other Companions (rta) would certainly have been present during the *al-‘ardah al-akhīrah*. Consequently, a narrative reported by ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās (rta) mentions that ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd (rta) was also a witness to this event. See: Abū al-Qāsim Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu‘jam al-kabīr*, 2nd ed., vol. 12 (Mawsil: Maktabah al-zahrā, 1983), 103, (no. 12602).

²⁸ Abū ‘Abdullāh Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Bahādur ibn ‘Abdullāh al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1980), 237.

²⁹ Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kamāl al-Dīn Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad ibn Sābiq al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Baydār: Manshūrāt al-raḍī, 1343 AH), 177.

If the Qur'ān is deliberated upon in the light of its coherence and arrangement, internal evidence from within the Qur'ān also pronounces this very judgement. The work which has been done by the scholars of the Farāhī school of thought on the Qur'ān in recent times speaks volumes that the text of the Qur'ān does not accept the variant readings. A person can see examples of this at many instances in Iṣlāhī's *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*. He writes:

Differences in variant readings have also been resolved in this commentary. The conventional and *mutawātir* reading is only the one on which the Qur'ān has been written, which we have in our hands. In this reading, the interpretation of each and every word and verse of the Qur'ān is done in such a manner in the light of classical Arabic literature, coherence and parallels of the Qur'ān that no doubt remains. Consequently, I have interpreted each verse on the basis of this reading and can say with full confidence that if this interpretation is done on the basis of some other readings then it can only be done at the expense of sacrificing the eloquence, wisdom and meaningfulness of the Qur'ān.³⁰

Here, it is possible that the narrative on the *Seven Aḥruf* might cause some confusion to some people in this regard. The narrative reads:

حدثني يحيى عن مالك عن ابن شهاب عن عروة بن الزبير عن عبد الرحمن بن عبد القاري أنه قال سمعت عمر بن الخطاب يقول سمعت هشام بن حكيم بن حزام يقرأ سورة الفرقان على غير ما أقرؤها وكان رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أقرأنيها فكدت أن أعجل عليه ثم أمهلت حتى انصرف ثم لبته بردائه فجئت به رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فقلت يا رسول الله إني سمعت هذا يقرأ سورة الفرقان على غير ما أقرأتنيها فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم أرسله ثم قال اقرأ يا هشام فقرأ القراءة التي سمعته يقرأ فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم هكذا أنزلت ثم قال لي اقرأ فقرأتها فقال هكذا أنزلت إن هذا القرآن أنزل على سبعة أحرف فاقرءوا ما تيسر منه

‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd al-Qārī narrated: “‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said before me: ‘I heard Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām reading Sūrah

³⁰ Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, vol. 8, 8.

Furqān in a different way from the one I used to read it, and the Prophet (sws) himself had read out this *sūrah* to me. Consequently, as soon as I heard him, I wanted to get hold of him. However, I gave him respite until he had finished the prayer. Then I got hold of his cloak and dragged him to the Prophet (sws). I said to him: “I have heard this person [Hishām ibn Ḥakīm ibn Ḥizām] reading Sūrah Furqān in a different way from the one you had read it out to me.” The Prophet (sws) said: “Leave him alone [O ‘Umar].” Then he said to Hishām: “Read [it].” [‘Umar said:] “He read it out in the same way as he had done before me.” [At this,] the Prophet (sws) said: “It was revealed thus.” Then the Prophet (sws) asked me to read it out. So I read it out. [At this], he said: “It was revealed thus; this Qur’ān has been revealed on *Seven Aḥruf*. You can read it in any of them you find easy from among them.””³¹

If the following points about this narrative are kept in contemplation, it becomes evident that it is an absolutely meaningless narrative which should not be considered of any worth in this regard:

Firstly, even though this narrative has been recorded in the basic books of Ḥadīth literature, no one in history has ever been able to offer a convincing explanation of it rendering it totally ambiguous. Al-Suyūṭī³² has recorded about forty interpretations of this narrative, and then while acknowledging the weakness of each of these has confessed that this narrative should be regarded among the *mutashābihāt*, whose meaning is only known to God:

وأرجحها عندي قول من قال: إن هذا من المتشابه الذي لا يدري تأويله

And to me the best opinion in this regard is that of the people who say that this Ḥadīth is from among matters of *mutashābihāt*, the meaning of which cannot be understood.³³

³¹ Abū ‘Abdullāh Mālīk ibn Anas, *Al-Mu’atta’* (Peshawar: Al-Maktabah al-ḥaqqāniyah, n.d.), 130, (no. 567).

³² Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān*, vol. 1, 165–172.

³³ Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Kamāl al-Dīn Abī Bakr ibn Muḥammad ibn Sābiq al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tanwīr al-ḥawālik ilā al-Mu’atta’ Imām Mālīk*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-

Secondly, the only plausible interpretation of the word *ahruf* is that it connotes pronunciation³⁴ of words the Arabs were used to. However, in this case, the text of the Ḥadīth itself negates this meaning. It is known that both ‘Umar (rta) and Ḥishām (rta) belonged to the same tribe: the Quraysh. Obviously, people of the same tribe could not have had different pronunciations.

Thirdly, even if it is accepted that this difference was of pronunciation between various tribes and as a result they were allowed to read it variously, the verb *unzila* (was revealed) is very inappropriate. The Qur’ān has specified that it was revealed in the language of the Prophet’s tribe: the Quraysh (See for example: 19:97, 44:58). After this, it can be accepted that the various tribes were allowed to read it according to their own accents, but how can this be accepted that the Almighty Himself revealed the various dialects and pronunciations.

Fourthly, it is known that Ḥishām had accepted Islam on the day Makkah was conquered. If this Ḥadīth is accepted, it would mean that even after the conquest of Makkah senior Companions and even a close associate like ‘Umar (rta) was unaware of the fact that the Prophet (sws) secretly taught the Qur’ān in some other form and reading from the one openly heard from the Prophet (sws) and preserved in writing and in memory. Every person can realize how grave this claim is and how far reaching are its effects.

Same is the case of the narratives which record the collection of the Qur’ān in the time of the caliphs Abū Bakr (rta) and ‘Uthmān (rta). The Qur’ān specifies that it was arranged and collected in the time of the Prophet (sws) under the direct guidance of the Almighty, as has been referred to earlier. On the other hand, these narratives present an entirely different picture which is not only against the Qur’ān but also against common sense. In the six canonical books, these narratives are primarily recorded on the authority of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124 AH). Authorities of *rijāl* regard him to be guilty of *tadlīs* and

jīl, 1993), 199.

34 The actual words are: *luḡhāt* and *lahjāt*. There is a difference between the two. In the former the pronunciation of the word changes because of a variation in *ḥarakāt* (eg. *جَل* and *جَلَ*), while in the latter the pronunciation of a word changes because of a variation in accent. (Translator)

idrāj. Besides these, if some other facets of his personality as referred to by Imām Layth ibn Sa‘d (d. 175 AH) in his letter to Imām Mālik (d. 179 AH) are kept in consideration, none of the narratives reported by him regarding such important issues as this is acceptable. He writes:

وكان يكون من ابن شهاب اختلاف كثير إذا لقيناه، وإذا كاتبه بعضنا فربما كتب في الشيء الواحد على فضل رأيه وعلمه بثلاثة أنواع ينقض بعضها بعضا، ولا يشعر بالذي مضى من رأيه في ذلك الأمر، فهو الذي يدعوني إلى ترك ما أنكرت تركي إياه.

And when we would meet Ibn Shihāb, there would arise a difference of opinion in many issues. When any one of us would ask him in writing about some issue, he, in spite of being so learned, would give three very different answers, each of which would negate the other and he would not even be aware of what he had already said. It is because of this that I have left him – something which you did not like.³⁵

Such is the reality behind these narratives. Consequently, this is an absolute truth that the Qur’ān has one reading only which is found in our codices. Besides this, the readings which are found in commentaries on the Qur’ān or are read and taught in our schools of religious instruction or are even in currency in certain areas are the remnants of those malignant campaigns from which no religious discipline of the Muslims has unfortunately remained protected.

These readings may have arisen from the insistence of some on the reading on which the Qur’ān was revealed before the *al-‘arḍah al-akhīrah* and from the forgetfulness of the narrators but later owing to the same motives which led to the fabrication of Ḥadīth, they became so rampant that at the end of the Umayyid dynasty several of them had come to prominence. It is said that Abū ‘Ubayd Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 224 AH) selected twenty five of them in his book. The seven readings which are famous in current times were selected by Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (d. 324 AH) at the end of the third century *hijrah*. Thus it is generally accepted that their number cannot be ascertained but every reading is

35 ‘Abbās ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥātim al-Durī, *Tarīkh Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘īn*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-qalam, n.d.), 375.

Qur'ān which has been reported through a correct chain of narration, is compatible in any way with the *maṣāḥif* prepared by 'Uthmān (rta) and is correct from any aspect as far as the Arabic language is concerned. Some of these readings are regarded as *mutawātir*; however, a look at their chains of narration which are found in books leaves no doubt that they are *aḥād* (isolate), and most of their narrators are suspect in the eyes of the *rijāl* authorities. Consequently, no scholar can even accept them as Ḥadīth, what to speak of the Qur'ān.

Source

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, *Islam: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Shehzad Saleem (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2009), 31–6.

Variant Readings

I have written in my treatise *Mīzān*^[1] that the Qur'ān is what is recorded in the *muṣḥaf*, and which, except for some parts of Africa and a few other areas, is recited by a vast majority of the Muslim ummah without the slightest variation. A question may arise on this: even if for the sake of discussion it is accepted that the Qur'ān is only what has just been specified and the common masses only read and study it, then why is the attitude of Muslim scholars different from this? How did it happen that the scholars of *Tafsīr*, Ḥadīth and *Fiqh* from the very beginning of these disciplines accorded equal status to the multiple readings of the Qur'ān, and would give preference to one over the other on the basis of their own opinion and inclination? So much so, jurists and ḥadīth scholars of the likes of Imām Mālik (d. 179 AH) and Imām Shāfi'ī (d. 204 AH) gave preference to the reading of Nāfi' ibn Abī Nu'aym (d. 169 AH) and 'Abdullāh ibn Kathīr (d. 120 AH) respectively.

The answer to this question is that long before all these scholars, the earliest Muslim authorities had formed the opinion that though it is not essential for the common man to acquire knowledge through the *akhbār-i āḥād*, it is essential for the scholars and the select to accept them and after being satisfied about their *isnād*, there is no difference in acquiring and adducing the knowledge gained through them and the knowledge that pervades among the common Muslims and which is being transferred from their generations to generations. Imām Shāfi'ī writes in his celebrated treatise *Al-Risālah*:

وعلم الخاصة سنة من خبر الخاصة يعرفها العلماء ولم يكلفها غيرهم وهي موجودة فيهم أو في بعضهم بصدق الخاص المخبر عن رَسُولِ اللَّهِ بها وهذا اللازم لأهل العلم أن يصيروا إليه

And the knowledge of the select is the sunnah which is acquired through their reports, which the scholars know and which is not essential for the common man to know. This sunnah is present with all the scholars or with some of them from God's Messenger (*sws*) through the information provided by a reliable informant and this is the knowledge which scholars must necessarily turn to.^[2]

[1] English title: *Islam: A Comprehensive Introduction*.

[2] Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *Al-Risālah*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār al-fikr,

Thus after the demise of the Prophet (*sws*), when trustworthy narrators started to state, for example, that while a companion had read the word مَالِك (owner) as مَلِك (king) in verse 2 of Sūrah Fātiḥah, and يَكْذِبُونَ in its intensive form as يُكْذِبُونَ in verse 10 of Sūrah Baqarah and يُوصِي in its passive form in verse 12 of Sūrah Nisā', then this was accepted in scholarly circles in the same way that the reports of his other sayings and deeds were being accepted. The reason for this was evident: if they did not accept these reports regarding the Qur'ān, they would also not have any basis to accept reports which depicted the Prophet's deductions, verdicts, explanations and exemplary character except if they were deemed to be against a Qur'ānic verse. The proliferation of variant readings took place because of this opinion of the *tābi'ūn* (followers of the companions). Not much later, among the experts of readings which were being produced, some became prominent who were not merely adept in various modes of pronunciation of the Arabian dialect like *iẓhār*, *ikhfā'*, *idghām*, *imālah*, *tafkhīm*, *ishmām* and *itmām* etc. but took a step ahead and by giving preference to one reading of the Qur'ān over the other as found in various reports of the knowledge of the select (*'ilm al-khāṣṣah*) referred to above compiled their specific set of readings that became famous by the names of these experts. This was much like the jurisprudence of Imām Mālik, Imām Shāfi'ī and other leading jurists becoming famous by their names. For this very reason, these experts of Qur'ānic readings are called "Readers invested with Preference" (*aṣḥāb al-ikhtiyār*). The result of this was and should have been that the students turn to them to learn their preference and choice of readings just as they turned to the jurists and Ḥadīth scholars to learn jurisprudence and Ḥadīth respectively. Moreover, many a time, it happened that these readers having preference adopted an intellectual centre of those times like Makkah, Madīnah, Kūfah, Baṣrah and Syria besides others as their abode. The result was that such was the fame that a preferential reading acquired among the scholars and readers of an area that it came to be said that the people of that area followed his reading. The word "people" here referred to the scholars and readers only and not to the common masses. The masses never accept or reject such things in this way. It is precisely for this reason that the situation changed and men of learning of a particular area after some time adopted the

preferential reading of some other reader. And it is for this reason that except for these learning centres, no other reading is found anywhere in the Muslim world nor is there any historical evidence of such acceptance or rejection of a reading. The only exception to this is Qirawān where Qāḍī ‘Abdullāh ibn Ṭālib who in the later part of the third century hijrah passed the order that people should only be taught the reading of Nāfi‘.^[3] Thus, after this, common Muslims as well were forced to read the Qur’ān on the reading of Nāfi‘ in Qirawān and in some other areas which were under its influence. The reason for this probably was that these people were the followers of Imām Mālik’s *fiqh* and about Imām Mālik, it has been pointed out above that he would generally prefer the reading of Nāfi‘.

Similar was the case with some small settlements which came under the influence of scholars. These settlements were very few in number and even exist today at some places. All other areas except these were never influenced by these changes nor did the scholars tried to influence them. Both carried on with their own ways. Thus the tradition of benefitting from variant readings in the disciplines of *tafsīr*, Ḥadīth, *fiqh* and others has been going on without interruption, and is still going on to a greater extent. Scholars discuss these readings in their writings, gatherings and religious seminaries, and professional readers today recite the Qur’ān on seven, ten and even more variant readings. However, everyone can see that among the common masses, there is only one Qur’ān in currency everywhere. They took it from the common companions, and in the terminology of Imam Shāfi‘ī transferred it from ‘*āmmah* to ‘*āmmah* (common masses to common masses). No doubt, it is also called the *riwāyah* of Ḥafṣ (d. 180 AH) but this should not be a cause of any misconception because mere reading or intonation is one thing and reading or intonation in the accent of the Arabs in a pleasing way by giving due regard to technical subtleties like *imālah*, *tafkhīm*, *ishbā‘*, *ikhtilās-i ṣilah*, *ishmām*, *rawm*, *tarqīq* and *taghlīz* that does not alter the meaning of the discourse in any way is another thing. It is this second aspect which is acquired from the *riwāyah* of Ḥafṣ in this Qur’ān, and ascribed to him on this basis. He was taught this reading from his teacher ‘Āsim ibn Abī al-Najūd (d. 127 AH) who in turn was a student of the celebrated follower Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Sulamī (d. 74 AH). Al-Sulamī taught its

[3] Abū al-Faḍl Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ ibn Mūsā, *Tartīb al-madārik wa-tartīb al-masālik li-ma‘rifah a‘lām madhhab Mālik*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyyah, 1998), 483.

subtleties in Kūfah to various students for almost forty years. About him, Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (d. 324 AH), the first person to have selected the seven canonical readings, has specified that he did not teach his own preferential reading but the very one on which ‘Uthmān (*rta*) had striven to gather the ummah on. He writes:

أول من أقرأ بالكوفة القراءة التي جمع عثمان رضي الله تعالى عنه الناس عليها أبو عبد
الرحمن السلمي

The first person who taught the reading in Kūfah on which ‘Uthmān had gathered the people was Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Sulamī.^[4]

He is the same person who upon seeing the proliferation of various readings among people had said:

كانت قراءة أبي بكر وعمر وعثمان وزيد بن ثابت والمهاجرين والأنصار واحدة كانوا يقرءون
القراءة العامة وهي القراءة التي قرأها رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم علي جبريل مرتين في
العام الذي قبض فيه وكان زيد قد شهد العرضة الأخيرة وكان يقرئ الناس بها حتى مات

The reading of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and Zayd ibn Thābit and that of all the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār was the same. They read the Qur’ān according to the *al-qirā’at al-‘āmmah*. This is the same reading which was read out twice by the Prophet (*sws*) to Gabriel in the year of his death. Zayd ibn Thābit was also present in this reading [called] the *al-‘ardah al-akhīrah*. It was this reading that he taught the Qur’ān to people till his death.^[5]

It is this very reading that is written in our codices of the Qur’ān. Not a single bit of evidence can be furnished from history except the endeavours of ‘Uthmān (*rta*) (d. 36 AH) and Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (d. 94 AH) to unite all Muslims on one Qur’ān in which a scholar used his influence or a ruler or a *qāḍī* used

[4] Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Mūsā ibn ‘Abbās ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb al-sab‘ah fī al-qirā’āt*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-ma‘ārif, 1400 AH), 67.

[5] Abū ‘Abdullāh Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Bahādur ibn ‘Abdullāh al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1980), 237.

political power to impose this Qur'ān among the Muslims, the way it was done is some West African counties with regard to the reading of Nāfi'. It was this Qur'ān which the Prophet (*sws*) and his successors gave currency to among the Muslims and it has remained in currency ever since. Consequently, when the readers of the Muslims were compiling their preferences in readings and when their Ḥadīth scholars were collecting the reports of *'ilm al-khāṣṣah* and their jurists and exegetes were solving the difficulties of the Qur'ān through them, Muslims were reading this very Qur'ān in the whole world. At the end of the first century hijrah when they entered India, they entered while reading it and when they landed at the shores of Java, Sumatra, Malaya and other islands of the Far East at the end of the eighth century, it was this very Qur'ān which was in their hands and God willing will remain in their hands till the Day of Judgement.

Here a person can pose the question: if despite all these facts, the academic tradition of the Muslims accepted all the reports related to *'ilm al-khāṣṣah*, why has the Farāhī School adopted a different stance in this regard? Our answer is that it is not easy for any person of learning to disregard reports narrated by reliable narrators; this needs an explicit Qur'ānic directive. Thus if the true meaning of the relevant verses of Surah Qiyāmah had become evident at the very beginning, Muslim scholars, jurists and exegetes would probably have adopted the same stance as the scholars of the Farāhī School. Imām Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930 AD) has explained the true meaning of these verses.^[6] Hence, that explicit Qur'ānic directive has become available on the basis of which it can be said that even if all the narratives which depict the variant readings of the Qur'ān are correct, they have been abrogated by the reading of the *'ardah akhīrah* for the universal addressees of the Qur'ān; hence they cannot be accepted in any way whatsoever.^[7] It is a directive of the Qur'ān that after its collection and arrangement, Muslims will be bound till the Day of Judgement

[6] Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī, *Tafsīr niẓām al-Qur'ān wa-tā'wīl al-Furqān bi-al-Furqān*, 1st ed. (Azamgarh: Dāi'rah ḥamidiyyah, 2008), 226–233.

[7] If a narrative recorded by al-Bukhārī is correct, then 'Umar (*rta*) too on the basis of this reasoning rejected many readings of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (*rta*) which he would present by saying: لَا أَدْعُ شَيْئًا سَمِعْتُهُ مِنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ (I will not give up anything of the Qur'ān I have heard from God's Messenger (*sws*)). See: Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 3rd ed., vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1987), 1628, (no. 4211).

to read it on the reading it was read by the Almighty after this collection. No Muslim can dare deviate from this directive of the Qur'ān. It states:

لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ • إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ وَقُرْآنَهُ • فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَهُ فَاتَّبِعْ (٧٥:١٦-١٨)

[To acquire] this [Qur'ān] swiftly [O Prophet!] do not move your tongue hastily over it. [It will be revealed like this. Rest assured] its collection and recital is Our responsibility. So when We have recited it [at that time], follow this recital. (75:16–18)

(Translated by Dr Shehzad Saleem)

Source

Shehzad Saleem, *Selected Essays of Javed Ahmad Ghamidi* (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2015).